

What's in a Date? – Parashah V'etchanan 5782

This Shabbat is an interesting confluence of dates.

This past weekend was Tisha B'Av, the 9th of the Hebrew month of Av. Av precedes the month of Elul, which is the last month right before Rosh Hashanah (in which we prepare for the High Holy Days with the daily recitation of Psalm 27 and reflection on our lives, our relationships, and how we conduct ourselves). Tisha B'Av is a traditional day of fasting and communal mourning, in remembrance of this date, on which a number of disasters in Jewish history occurred, including the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem. Included in the observance of this date is the reading of Lamentations.

In contrast, six days later, we observe what is called Tu B'Av, the 15th of Av. This day, which completes at sundown today, is kind of like a Jewish “Sadie Hawkins Day.” Weddings are often held on this day, and matchmakers are busy. It is considered in the Talmud as a joyous day, as in days of old, in post-biblical times, it served as a matchmaking day for unmarried women in the Second Temple period before the fall of the Second Temple in 70 CE. In the Talmud it says that the young women of Jerusalem would dress in borrowed white garments (thus not out-doing anyone, nor shaming anyone who did not have any), and the young women would go out into the vineyards, dancing and singing, “Young man, lift up your eyes and consider who you choose.”¹ This date has become in modern times more like a Jewish Valentine's Day.

The Sages of the Talmud attempt to find the origin of this day, and offers several explanations. One of them is that on this day the Biblical “tribes of Israel were permitted to mingle with each other,” namely: to marry women from other tribes². This explanation is somewhat surprising, since nowhere in the Bible is there a prohibition on “intermarriage” among the 12 tribes of Israel. This Talmudic source probably is alluding to a story in the book of Judges (chapter 21), where it says: After a civil war between the tribe of Benjamin and other Israelite tribes, the tribes vowed not to intermarry with men of the tribe of Benjamin.

¹ BT Ta'anit 26b

² BT Ta'anit 30b

I find it fascinating that Tu B'Av, like several Jewish holidays (Passover, Sukkot, Tu B'shevat) begins on the night between the 14th and 15th day of the Hebrew month, since this is the night of a full moon in our lunar calendar. Linking the night of a full moon with romance, love, and fertility is not uncommon in ancient cultures.³

And, we have this week's Parashah, V'etchanan, part of the first oration that Moses gives, recounting the people's journey from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to Sinai, and on to the Promised Land. This oration takes place before the people cross over into the Promised Land. Here Moses' retelling continues⁴:

וַאֲתַחֲנֵן אֶל־יְהוָה בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר:

I pleaded with יהוה at that time, saying, "O lord יהוה, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon." But יהוה was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. יהוה said to me, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again! Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across yonder Jordan. Give Joshua his instructions, and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see." The scene ends with the statement: Meanwhile we stayed on in the valley near Beth-peor.

We see here pleading, flattery, request, great disappointment and blame, consequence, consolation, and a reminder of the natural way of things – the going forward, even in the face of disappointment, and the reminder to pass on responsibility to the next generation, and the next leader, in this case, Joshua.

As humans, we tend to dislike change. We have expectations, visions in our heads of the way things "should" go. One of the things that we learn in life is the old adage that "life isn't fair." Moses could have retold this story, without including

³ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tu-bav/>

⁴ Deuteronomy 3:23-29

the emotion and disappointment, struggling and pleading that he had, and the placing of blame on the people is an added bonus, illustrating his struggle with knowledge that he would not cross into the Promised Land. But he does tell this story, for us to learn from, and notice also, that he reluctantly accepts his fate, and continues on, leading the people and preparing Joshua for leadership.

This Shabbat is called Shabbat Nachamu, the Shabbat of Consolation. From here we count seven weeks to Rosh Hashana, the date that we stand before God – as individuals and as a community - and ask for forgiveness. During these weeks, we traditionally read a different section of haftarah – passages from the book of Isaiah, seven separate readings that illustrate God’s compassion, forgiveness, and consolation, as well as the promise of God’s continued covenant with the people Israel.

I think that Tisha B’Av, connected with the dates on which the first and second Temples were destroyed, remind us that nothing in this physical world is truly permanent. It is a reminder that certainty is an illusion. It is with humility that we enter each day, and pray it goes well.

This is coupled with Tu B’Av, the Jewish Valentine’s Day, reminding us that love, partnership, being with one another and sharing our lives is what life is all about. Bringing joy to life and living it as fully as possible is the greatest consolation and balance that we have, bringing light to the darkness, and relishing each moment.

As we move from the month of Av into the month of Elul, and approach Rosh Hashana and the High Holy Days, may we learn from our mistakes, embrace humility, and begin our process of reflection and teshuvah, returning to our best selves.

Shabbat shalom,
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